



Voices from the Gaps

Sujata Massey

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“I have a question for you.” I kept my voice light. “Do you think of me as Japanese or American?” “I don’t know why you’re worrying about things like this after the night we’ve had - you could have lost your life on those stairs!”

“You pointed out once that I had a problem defining myself. I wanted to hear what you thought. I’m curious,” I added, feeling his eyes on me. “Both,” he said at last. “Turn here. I want to avoid Roppongi Crossing.”

“It’s impossible to be both!” I was irritated at his cop-out. “What do you want me to say? That you have the face and figure of the woman in the Japanese art book, but a meaner streak than Tonya Harding? That despite your tea ceremony manners, you’re absolutely undaunted by power?”

— The Salaryman’s Wife

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1964
- * Anglo-Indian novelist; moved to the United States as a child
- * Author of the Rei Shimura mystery series

This page was researched and submitted by: Shante Carter, Tina Love, and Josh Stinogel on 5/7/02.

Biography

Sujata Massey was born in Sussex, England in 1964 to an Indian father and German mother. She was the first of three daughters, and due to concerns of discrimination, her parents decided to immigrate to the United States, where Massey’s father found a home at the University of Minnesota. She graduated from Johns Hopkins University in 1986 with a degree in journalism, and went on to work for the *Baltimore Evening Sun* writing articles on fashion and food.



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Her residence soon changed when she married Tony, a Navy medical officer, and they moved to Japan in 1991. By 1993, her husband had fulfilled his military obligation, so the couple returned to Baltimore, and soon after, Massey began her fiction writing career. In December 1998, Massey and her husband adopted their daughter Pia in India, and she now balances motherhood with her successful writing career.

After receiving a 1996 writing grant from Malice Domestic Limited, she was offered a contract for two mystery novels. Since then, Sujata Massey has introduced the world to five Rei Shimura mysteries: *The Salaryman's Wife* (1997), *Zen Attitude* (1998), *The Flower Master* (1999), *The Floating Girl* (2000), and *The Bride's Kimono* (2001). She has also garnered many awards for her work, including: The 1998 Agatha Award for Best First Novel, *The Salaryman's Wife*; a 1999 Edgar Award Nomination for Best Paperback Original, *Zen Attitude*; The 2000 Macavity Award for Best Novel, *The Flower Master*; and a 2000 Agatha Award Nomination for Best Novel, *The Bride's Kimono*.

Although Massey's parents migrated to the United States when she was only five years old, her upbringing in Philadelphia, Berkeley, and St. Paul, as well as her family's numerous trips to Asia and Europe, left her never completely feeling American. She also could not fully identify with her Indian heritage, in part because she did not learn any Indian languages while she was growing up. During an interview with *Writers Write*, Massey reveals the feelings of alienation this inability to communicate caused, "I felt sorry about it and whenever I was in India I felt very awkward because I looked Indian, but I didn't seem to speak. When you're in India, people think that when you don't speak that it means that you didn't want to." Massey is extremely candid with her struggle to embrace her bi-cultural identity, and it is an endeavor which she shares with her protagonist, Rei Shimura:

"I wanted to write about a woman who had a foot in two cultures. I'm Indian and German myself, but I didn't want to write about a character exactly like myself. Rei is half Japanese and half American; she loves both countries, which is very much like my own background" (*IVillage*).



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This yearning for a sense of identity that is not bound by social or ethnic constraints recurs throughout the series. Writing from the perspective of an outsider extremely familiar with Japanese society, Massey also uses Rei as a tool to investigate various facets of Japanese culture and history. She affirms that, “In every book I write, I try to explore a different area of Japanese life” (*Interbridge*). Massey’s yearly research trips to Japan reaffirm her commitment to provide imaginative and accurate storylines. Standing alone, each of the Rei Shimura novels presents diverse issues and multi-dimensional characters. As a series, Sujata Massey has maintained the individuality of each book, and has weaved these varied themes into a fluid series that is continuously evolving.

The Salaryman’s Wife opens on New Year’s Eve with Rei being groped by a stranger during a crowded train to the Japanese Alps. That evening, Rei’s relaxing bath is interrupted when a naked and surprised Hugh Glendinning, unable to read the kanji (pictogram), mistakenly enters her bathroom. Rei discovers even more about the handsome Scotsman when he joins her and the other guests for dinner and a New Year’s Eve celebration later that night. The next morning, Rei learns that one of the guests has turned up missing. Unwilling to let the news spoil her plans, Rei begins her hike, only to discover the woman’s body in the snow.

Although she is determined to keep her job as an English teacher, Rei attempts to uncover the truth and clear both her and Hugh’s names, and in the process, crashes the funeral and breaks into a house while posing as the cleaning lady. Her search leads her into a hostess bar, an American military bar and to the yakuza (Japanese mafia). Rei’s antics make her a target not only of the police and the paparazzi but also the real killer. When she finally manages to put the pieces of the puzzle together Rei sees a picture she never expected to see.

The second book of the Rei Shimura series, *Zen Attitude*, centers on Rei’s continuing relationship with her live in love interest, salaryman (foreign businessman) Hugh Glendinning. When the purchase on an antique tansu chest goes sour and a series of related murders follow, Hugh foots the bill for her legal fees and investment loses. Her financial independence is threatened, and the problem is exaggerated with the visit of Hugh’s brother Angus, the world-traveling black sheep of the family.

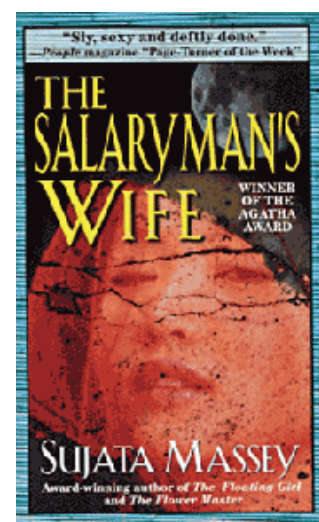


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Rei's investigation of the murders leads her into a variety of social situations, and gives the reader a chance to see Japanese culture through the eyes of an outsider. Her acquaintances range in social status from wealthy aristocrats who own a local Zen temple to unemployed immigrants trying to scratch out a living.

With Hugh out of the story, in *The Flower Master*, Rei returns to life on her own, supporting herself with her antiques trading business. In an attempt to make her desirable to Japanese suitors, her aunt convinces her to take up ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arranging, but Rei is more interested in meeting potential clients and increasing her knowledge of Japanese culture.



A murder at the school, followed by the mysterious disappearance of a large pottery collection, plunges Rei into the role of amateur sleuth once again as she attempts to help her aunt save face and wards off a series of personal attacks. A potential romance with Takeo, the headmaster's son, further complicates matters, and provides a look into the role Japanese families play in their children's courtships. The underlying plot line of pesticide use in flower plantations gives the novel an environmental theme, and allows Rei to investigate a whole new area of Japanese politics and culture.

In Sujata Massey's fourth novel, *The Floating Girl*, Rei has taken a job writing an arts and antiques column for the *Gaijin Times*, a magazine targeted toward foreigners living in Tokyo. When the magazine changes to a comic-book format, Rei is assigned to write about the history of manga (comic book) art. In doing her research, while staying at Takeo's beach house, Rei discovers a doujinshi, a knock-off of an original manga, called *Showa Story* that is far superior artistically to any other manga she has seen. Her search for the doujinshi's creators leads Rei into animation shops, coffeehouses and strip clubs. When one of the doujinshi's creators is found dead in a scene straight out of the comic book, Rei finds herself in the middle of another murder investigation.



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Rei is moonlighting as an art history teacher at a Japanese junior high school in the story “Junior High Samurai.” When she notices one of her students being bullied, Rei steps in, despite other teachers’ suggestions to the contrary. Determined to help, Rei makes a visit to the boy’s home and learns that he has disappeared. With her well honed sleuthing skills Rei attempts to uncover the truth about the boy’s disappearance and put an end to the bullying.

In *The Bride’s Kimono*, Rei Shimura travels to Washington D.C., where she has been hired to give a lecture on a group of priceless Edo-period kimono. Once again, Rei finds herself embroiled in a legal fiasco when one of the kimonos is stolen, and a woman from her tour group is found murdered with Rei’s passport. In the process of trying to find the stolen kimono and clear her name, Rei struggles to claim her identity in an American culture that feels familiar, yet distant. While exposing the role of the stolen kimono in an ancient Japanese love triangle, she becomes involved in a love triangle of her own. This novel brings to light issues of cultural identity, constructs of female respectability and the conflicting desire for independence and companionship.

While each novel explores several individual themes, issues of culture and independence arise throughout the series. The issue of culture can be explored, via the character of Rei Shimura, by looking at both bicultural identity and the outsider in Japanese culture. Sujata Massey created Rei to be a person living in two worlds. Born and raised in San Francisco, by her European-American mother and her Japanese father, Rei is a Japanese-American living in and around Tokyo, Japan. Sujata Massey discusses Rei’s confusion over ethnic identity:

“Rei would like to be treated like a Japanese native, but her manners aren’t quite right, and she speaks her mind too freely. At the same time, she battles a longing for Western luxuries and wonders whether it would be appropriate to consider romance with a Western man, given the number of foreigners who have used and abandoned women in Japan” (*Interbridge*).



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Always conscious of trying to fit in and respectfully aware of cultural norms and expectations in Japan, Rei is an outsider looking in, neither separate from nor completely included in Japanese life. Rei does not feel entirely at home in the United States either. Sujata Massey mentions that in her novel, *The Bride's Kimono*, “the settings are divided evenly between Japan and the U.S. , and this gives Rei a chance to examine her own sense of foreignness at being back in the country of her birth after so many years in Japan” (Interbridge).

The issue of culture can also be seen in Sujata Massey’s focus on foreigners living in Japan. Massey spoke in great detail about Rei’s observations of Tokyo’s gaijin:

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While Rei strives to fit in with Japanese people, she also spends time examining the rigid hierarchy among Tokyo’s gaijin, as foreigners are called. At the top of the heap are international expatriate businessmen who earn high salaries and live in luxury apartments with central heating paid for by company expense accounts. Next down are the American military, who have a cost-of-living allowance that covers American groceries and a house far from Tokyo without central heating. Below the military is Rei Shimura’s class: teachers, translators and bar workers from countries such as the U.S. , Canada and Australia. These gaijin usually share tiny, freezing apartments, one or two rooms with a hot-plate kitchen and a small bathroom molded out of a single piece of plastic. They have some tough times, but do not suffer the discrimination shown to workers who have traveled from countries like the Philippines, Brazil and Iran to perform jobs that are considered too hard, dirty or dangerous for the local population (Interbridge).

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Massey incorporates characters from all walks of life into her Rei Shimura series. In doing so she is able to integrate societal issues into her works and thereby challenge her readers to move beyond disruptive stereotypes.



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Within Sujata Massey's works, the issue of independence, both feminist and financial, plays a large role. As Rei struggles to advance her antiques business she works to overcome gender biases against independent women, and more specifically against multicultural women. In most of the novels this theme comes to bear strongly in her dealings with clients, relatives, and romantic interests. Her independence in both spheres is threatened by her relationships where she frequently becomes involved with wealthy men who are interested in financially supporting her.

The Salaryman's Wife, *Zen Attitude* and *The Bride's Kimono* specifically address her relationship with Hugh, a wealthy executive who is more than happy to foot the tab for housing, food and any business expenses Rei could possibly incur. When her aunt attempts to get her involved with traditional Japanese men, she has to prove herself to her family as well. Also, as an outsider she has to show her clients that she is knowledgeable about her business as well as professional. The hardships she endured in attempting to throw a proper business dinner party in *Zen Attitude* show the lengths Rei is willing to go in order to impress her clients. Through Rei, Massey asserts the independence of the working woman both in finances and in relationships.

The Rei Shimura novels are not merely a great mystery series; they are a venue in which Sujata Massey discusses serious societal issues such as environmentalism, unwed mothers, absentee fathers, anti-foreigner sentiment, identity problems, biracialism, racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. Massey's continued commitment to these issues forces her readers to continue to question their own individual prejudices. Her works serve as an excellent example of the genre of feminist mystery writing.



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